DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 209 149 SO 013 700

AUTHOR Silverman, Arnold R.; Feigelman, William
TITLE The Adjustment of Black Children Adopted by White Families.
INSTITUTION Nassau Community Coll., Garden City, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Mental Health (DHEW), Rockville, Md.; State Univ. of New York, Albany. Research Foundation.
PUB DATE Aug 81
GRANT 7109a; 7110a; MH-271129-01
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Adopted Children; Behavioral Science Research; *Black Youth; *Emotional Adjustment; Emotional Problems; *Family (Sociological Unit); Family Counseling; Family Involvement; Family Life; Racial Factors; Social Science Research; *Whites
IDENTIFIERS *Transracial Adoption

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a research project undertaken to explore placement of minority children in white families. The intent of the research was to evaluate criticism of transracial adoption by groups including the National Association of Black Social Workers which stated in 1972 that "Black children should be placed only with black families...because black children in white homes are cut off from a healthy development of themselves as black people." Project staff compared questionnaire responses of 97 white families which had adopted white children with responses of 56 white families which had adopted black children. Questions focused on parental judgments regarding the adopted child's overall adjustment, the frequency with which the adopted child encountered physical or emotional problems, family opposition to the adoption, pre-adoptive experiences of the child, and the child's age at adoption. Findings indicated that black children adopted into white families exhibited more maladjustment problems than white children adopted into white families, transracially adopted black children were often older than comparable white adopted children, black children were more likely to be adopted after infancy and were often exposed to hostile pre-adoptive environments, and adjustment of all adopted children declined as the children grew older. The conclusion is that the age of a child at adoption has more impact on adjustment than does transracial adoption. The implication is that transracial adoption at an early age remains a viable option for the placement of black children. (DB)

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The Adjustment of Black Children Adopted by White Families*

Arnold R. Silverman and William Feigelman

Nassau Community College
Garden City, New York 11530

*The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the National Institute of Mental Health's Small Grant Program (MH 27129-01), the faculty awards program of the Research Foundation of the State University of New York (Grants 7110a and 7109a) and the Sabbaticals Committee of Nassau Community College. We would also like to acknowledge the comments of Russell Middleton of the University of Wisconsin on an earlier draft.

SP 013 700

"The Adjustment of Black Children Adopted by White Families"

by Arnold R. Silverman and William Feigelman,

Nassau Community College, Garden City, New York 11530

ABSTRACT:

The purpose of the current research was to explore some of the central policy questions in connection with the placement of minority children. Specifically we wanted to know whether social science research could support the arguments advanced against transracial adoptive placements. The research was based upon the questionnaire responses of 153 adoptive families. It explored the various causes of maladjustment among 97 inracially and 56 transracially adopted children. The central question posed concerned whether adopting across racial lines is a more significant element in contributing to poorer adjustments of adopted children than the amount of time children spend waiting to be placed. The evidence obtained, using multiple regression analysis, indicated that age at placement was a more powerful element in affecting children's adjustments than race. Initially it was found that transracially placed children were more maladjusted than their inracially adopted peers. Yet, when age at placement was taken into account these differences disappeared. The longer a child waited before placement the greater his chances of being maladjusted. Thus, these findings suggest that transracial adoption may continue to be a viable option for the tens of thousands of nonwhite children awaiting placement.

Almost a decade ago the practice of transracial adoption--the adoption of black children by white American parents--came under severe criticism by many black Americans. Even the most moderate criticism, which accepted the good intentions of those attempting to place black children in white families, argued that the process was fraught with danger for the child's development (Chestang, 1972). A position paper approved by the National Association of Black Social Workers in 1972 put the matter in even stronger terms.

> ....Black children should be placed only with black families whether in foster care or for adoption. Black children belong physically, psychologically and culturally in black families in order that they receive the total sense of themselves and develop a sound projection of their future... Black children in white homes are cut off from a healthy development of themselves as black people. (Simon and Alstein, 1977: 50)

The position paper goes on to note the commitment of its authors to "go back to our communities to end this particular form of genocide."

It is clear that this statement and the efforts that emanated from it had a substantial impact on reducing the number of black children adopted by white families in the United States. In 1971, 2,574 black children were adopted by white families in the United States; by 1976, the last year for which comparable data is available, the number had dropped to 1,056 (Simon and Alstein, 1977: 30; Feigelman and Silverman, 1979: 303).

In the present paper these and other criticisms of transracial adoption are evaluated, employing data from a survey of 153 white families, 97 of whom had adopted white children and 56 who adopted blacks.

Despite the best efforts of black social workers and others in the child care profession, it seems clear that substantial numbers of black children are unable to find homes within the black community. Black children continue to form a disproportionate number of those

children who do not have permanent homes (Fanshel, 1978). Data from the Child Welfare League of America suggests that the number of nonwhite children free for placement in child care agencies substantially exceeds the number of nonwhite homes approved for placing these children (Haring, 1976; Simon and Alstein, 1977: 30-31).

All of the above remains true despite the considerable progress that has been made in the last decade in the placement of black children in black homes. Many of the institutional and additional obstacles that effectively prohibited black families from adopting through agencies have been substantially reduced. Agencies such as Homes for Black Children in Detroit have achieved remarkable successes in placing more blacks within the black community (Day, 1979; 121-130). Nonetheless, significant numbers of black children remain without permanent homes.

Ideally, we would want to compare the adjustments of transracially adopted black children with those of inracially adopted children, specifically with white children adopted in white homes and black children adopted by black parents. Regrettably no such studies of this sort have been undertaken. The bulk of the research examining the adjustment of transracially adopted children has been conducted without the inclusion of control groups.

In nearly a dozen studies it is consistently indicated that approximately three fourths of transracially adopted preadolescent or younger children adjust well in their adoptive homes (Fanshel, 1972; Grow and Shapiro, 1974; Davis, 1961; Di Virgilio, 1-56; Simon and Alstein, 1977; Kim and Reid, 1970; Keltie, 1969; Fricke, 1965; Rathbun, et.al.,1958; Kim, 1977; Falk, 1970; Nutt and Snyder, 1972; Zastrow, 1977). In the half dozen or so black child/white parent adoption studies that have been done similar trends have prevailed (Grow and Shapiro, 1974; Simon and Alstein, 1977; Fricke, 1965; Zastrow, 1977; Falk, 1970; Nutt and Snyder, 1972.

Yet, we don't know whether transracial adoptions compare any less (or possibly more) favorably with inrace adoptions; no comparative studies of black inrace and black/white transrace adoptions have been completed.

One of the few studies in which a comparative approach is taken is an investigation by Falk (1970), which was based upon 186 transracially adopted children and 170 in racially adopting white families. This study provides some indication that transracially adopted children are more likely to have problematical adjustments than their inracially adopted peers. Transracially adopting parents anticipated that their black children might experience more difficulties in school, dating and getting jobs; such differences may or may not indicate adjustment difficulties as much as they may reflect parents realistic assessments of societal prejudices. The study also found that fewer transracially adopting parents would be willing to recommend adoption to others or would be willing to adopt if they had it to do over again. These differences suggest less satisfaction and poorer adjustments on the part of transracially adopted children. Is the fact of race difference a significant one in depreciating the adjustment of transracially adopted children? This study suggests that it may indeed be the case.

In contrast, however, to Falk's findings Zastrow (1977:69-77) found that white parents of black adopted children and white parents of white adopted children children did not differ either in their rating of their child's adjustment or in their satisfaction as a whole. Interestingly, the adoptive parents of black children also commented that they had experienced far fewer problems with racial hostility and antogonism than they had expected. Thus, the question remains open to some degree. Is race consequential in affecting

child's adjustments? And if so, how consequential is it?

Another frequently made argument against transracial placements is that the hostility of the families and friends of white adopting parents will adversely affect the adjustment of the adopted child. Leon Chestang, for example, has argued that:

> The white family that adopts a black child is no longer a "white family." In the eyes of the community its members become traitors, nigger-lovers, do-gooders, rebels, oddballs, and most significantly, ruiners of the community. Unusual psychological armaments are required to shield oneself from the behavioral and emotional onslaughts of these epithets. Chestang, 1972: 102)

There is certainly a plausible quality to this argument. It is well known that the prejudice and discrimination aimed at black Americans has often had negative and devastating effects on their personal adjustments (Kardiner and Ovesey, 1951; Karon, 1958). It is less clear, however, that prejudice and discrimination aimed at black adopted children is of such a magnitude that it leads to serious personality problems. One of the more interesting things that emerges from the studies of transracially adopted black children is the absence of the kind of unremitting hostility that Chestang and others expect. Simon and Alstein (1977) report that less than 10 percent of their sample of transracially adopting families reported any resistence by their friends and neighbors to their adoption. Families offered a bit more opposition to the adoption of black children. Thirty seven percent of the sample reported that their families (grandparents, uncles and aunts of the adopted child) continued to oppose the adoption (Simon and Alstein, 1977: 95-98).

The data in the Simon and Alstein study is by no means isolated. Charles Zastrow (1977) also found that most parents encountered a good deal less hostility and opposition than they had

expected. It seems probable that the hostility that does exist towards transracially adopted black children does have some negative effect on their adjustment; the question is how much? And, it remains to be measured how significant this factor is in affecting children's adjustments when compared with other likely adjustment influences.

On the other side of the adjustment equation we have yet to consider the influence of delayed placement. Many students of child development such as Selma Fraiberg (1977), Anna Freud (1973), John Bowlby (1952) and other recognize the importance of continuity and stability in the child's environment, particularly during his or her early years. Some students of the problem, such as Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1973), have placed such a critical emphasis on the need for permanence and continuity that when at issue they claim it should take precedence over the links between biological parent and child. The absence of a stable and enduring parental relationship is seen as one of the most devastating and traumatic event that can happen in a child's development.

The desirability of early permanent placement is generally accepted as axiomatic within the social work profession (Lawder, et. al., 1969; 12-24). In the work of Kadushin (1970) and others it is well documented that the later the child is placed the more serious and lasting are the adjustment problems that accompany the adoption. In David Fanshel's (1972) well known study of Native American children adopted by white families it is found that children's adjustment was negatively correlated with age at placement. Fanshel's research also points to why delayed placement may be so significant for the child's ultimate well being. Not only is it a matter of disruption and discontinuity but the child who is placed later is

more likely to suffer from a hazardous environment. Fanshel points out that children who are adopted later are often exposed to the problems of poverty, mental illness, disease and alcoholism among their parents (Fanshel, 1972: 303-304).

Our study will assess the effects of delayed placement and compare it to other sources of maladjustment for the transracially adopted child. Does race difference and racial isolation in an alien community pose a more potent determinant for a child's adoptive adjustment than the discontinuities and hazards associated with delayed placement? Or does the ever shifting and unsettled conditions associated with late placement exert overshadowing consequences on the child's development? Which factors take preeminence in influencing children's behavior?

Thus, the question we intend to pursue in this study focuses on these competing views explaining the adjustment of transracially adopted children. There is a very perplexing policy dilemma--which is better or worse--placing a child in another racial group and thereby subjecting him or her to a position of marginality; or is one more likely to risk doing serious psychological damage to the child by delaying placement until same race adoptive parents can be found? Indeed, given the existing realities of placement opportunities for minority children, to exclude the possibility of transracial adoption may eliminate the likelihood of adoption althgether. We need to sharpen our understanding of the order of magnitude and of the relative significance of each of the many factors that contribute to a child's overall adoptive adjustment. Once we obtain a better grasp of the relative importance of each factor then social policies and practices can be formulated with

a more realistic assessment of their probable impact.

Data and Methods

The data for the present paper were gathered in 1975 from a sample of white adopting parents. The sample was assembled from membership lists of adoptive parent groups and from the names of those individuals who adopted through an agency specializing in inter-country and transracial placements. Also included were the names of those adopting families who were known to officers of the adoptive parent groups, but who were not members of the groups. One third of the more than three thousand names received were mailed extensive questionnaires. Of the 1,121 families who received questionnaires 713 returned them for a completion rate of 63 percent. A comparison of the characteristics of the adoptive parents who responded with the characteristics of adopting parents in other studies revealed that there were few differences. (Silverman, 1980)

The study was originally intended to collect data on families who had adopted foreign born children, but it included a sample of families who adopted white and black children born in the United States for purposes of comparison. There were 56 white families who adopted black children and 97 who had adopted white children. Our analysis will be based on these families.

The dependent variable in this presentation will be measured by an index of child's maladjustment. This scale was created from the responses to four items on the questionnaire. The respondents were asked to make a judgement about their child's overall adjustment and to indicate the frequency with which their child encountered emotional, growth and physical problems. A factor analysis indicated

that the responses to the question on physical problems were unrelated to the factor formed by the responses to the other three questions. The question on physical problems was thus eliminated from the index.

The principle factor underlying the three variables employed in the index accounted for 60 percent of the variation in these same variables. For a given respondent the index had a maximum possible score of 12 (very maladjusted) and a minimum score of 1 (not at all maladjusted). No child received a score of more than eight and the majority of children received a score of three or less. A score of eight would mean that a child often encountered difficulties in two of the three problem areas. A score of three would mean that a child sometimes experienced problems in one of the three problem areas.

Similar scales have been used by a number of students of adoptive adjustments (Fanshel, 1972: 162-164; Zastrow, 1977: 74-77; Grow and Shapiro, 1974: 137-150). Fanshel's scale was significantly correlated with his measure of overall adjustment which employed assessments made by interviewers and psychiatrists as well as parental self reports (Fanshel, 1972: 305-312). Zastrow also reported close agreement between the ratings made by parents of their adopted child's adjustment and those made by interviewers (Zastrow, 1977: 69-73).

A similar index was constructed to assess family opposition to the adoption. The adopting families were asked whether the husband's parents response to the adoption had been positive, mixed, indifferent or negative. Similar questions were posed about the responses of the wife's parents and about those of other relatives. The responses to these three items were then added to form a scale

of family opposition. Scores on the index ranged from a minimum of three (no opposition) to twelve (a great deal of opposition). No family received a score of more than nine and a majority of the families had scores of four or less. The principle factor underlying the three variables employed in the index of family opposition accounted for 50 percent of the variation in these items.

Findings

Table I appears Here

The cross tabulation of the adopted child's maladjustment scores by his or her racial background, presented in Table I, clearly demonstrates an association between transracial adoption and maladjustment. Table I, however, does not necessarily demonstrate the source of the maladjustment. Is this maladjustment inherent in the transracial relationship or is it an artifact of the child's pre-adoptive experience and his or her present stage of development? Black children are more likely to be adopted after infancy and are often exposed to hostile preadoptive environments. Transracially adopted black children are often older than comparable white adopted children. Black children, then, may be reaching more complex and difficult stages in their personal development than a comparable group of white adopted children who are somewhat younger.

Table II appears here

The data in Table II indicates that there is a clear association between age at adoption and maladjustment. The older the child is at adoption, the higher his or her maladjustment score. This data could be taken to support the hypothesis that preadoptive environment, rather than transracial relationship, is critical for

the adjustment of the black adopted child.

Table III appears here

Table III shows that adjustment of all adopted children in our sample declines as they grow older. These data are compatible with the argument that as a child grows older his or her increasingly complex developmental patterns will lead to more problems irrespective of race differences between parent and child. These trends are also compatible with the hypothesis that the problems in transracial adoptions will only become apparent as the child grows older and is exposed to an increasingly hostile world outside of his or her family.

In order to sort out the equally plausible arguments suggested above it is necessary to subject our data to multiple regression analysis. The results of this analysis is presented in Table IV.

Table IV appears here

The regression equation looks at the impact of each of the variables under scrutiny while controlling for all of the others. The association between child's race and maladjustment, present in Table I, disappears in the regression equation. The regression coefficients for adopting a black rather than a white child are negligible and do not remotely approach statistical significance at the .05 level. This datum suggests that transracial adoption, in and of itself, does not have a negative impact on the adjustment of adopted children. The regression coefficients for FAMILY OPPOSITION are positive, modest in size and statistically significant. This finding is consistent with the arguments of those opposed to transracial adoption. Yet, the impact of family opposition is not nearly as great as would be suggested by transracial adoption's critics. Given critics arguments

FAMILY OPPOSITION should have been more sizable than was observed. When the variable FAMILY OPPOSITION was excluded from the analysis in Table IV, the regression coefficients for the other variables remained virtually unchanged. This would suggest that opposition to the adopted child is not based upon race alone; whatever differences that do exist in family opposition associated with race, they are not sufficient to create differences in the child's adjustment.

The age of the adopted child at the time of the study also had an impact that was to some degree congruent with the position of those critical of transracial adoption. The older the child, the greater the child's maladjustment. The regression coefficients for the variable AGE showed some trend of association; it approached but did not achieve statistical significance. It was in the direction predicted by the arguments of critics. The fact that the level of hostility has been adjusted for would seem to rule out the claim that maladjustment increases because the child is the target of increasing age linked hostility. The maladjustment resulting from aging may result either from the simple increase in the child's developmental capacities or, as has also been suggested, from problems of racial identity unrelated to overt hostility.

An analysis of white American born adopted children and children born in Colombia was conducted employing the same set of independent variables as those used in Table IV. In this analysis the variable AGE also had a modest positive impact on maladjustment. Colombian children, it should be noted, are not the targets of racism, either direct or subtle, in anything like the proportions encountered by Black Americans. Given this, it would seem likely that the impact of increasing age has more to do with the child's development than

his or her transracial adoption.

Clearly, the most consequential variable in the present analysis is the child's age at adoption. The older the child is when adopted, the greater his or her maladjustment. The regression coefficients for AGE AT ADOPTION are moderate in strength and statisically significant. This data is consistent with the claims of those who argue that it is the child's pre-adoptive environment that is most crucial in his or her adjustment.

The standardized regression coefficient for AGE AT ADOPTION is larger than those for any of the other variables in the equation. Most central to our analysis is the fact that it is larger than the standardized regression coefficient for FAMILY OPPOSITION. A step wise regression of the variables in Table IV indicates that AGE AT ADOPTION accounts for more of the variance explained in the index of child maladjustment than any of the other variables considered here. Of the 20.9 percent of the variance explained by the four variables, AGE AT ADOPTION alone accounts for 15.1 percent.

Similarly, when the intercorrelated ($r = .51$) variables of AGE and AGE AT ADOPTION are excluded from the regression equation in Table IV the entire equation loses significance. If the equation including only FAMILY OPPOSITION and BLACK ADOPTED CHILD had achieved statistical significance it would only have accounted for 3.5 percent of the variance. Thus, it should be abundantly clear that the most decisive element in influencing children's maladjustment scores is the child's age at adoption.

The data presented above has potentially dramatic policy implications. They would seem to suggest that the deleterious consequences of delayed placement are far more serious than those of

transracial adoption. Our findings would seem to imply that where a choice is to be made between transracial placement and continued foster or institutional care, that transracial placement would clearly be the option most conducive to the welfare of the child. The conventional wisdom of social work that the earliest permanent placement is most desirable is amply supported in the present research.

In recommending transracial adoption as a policy option it is important to recognize that there is some receptivity to the idea within the black community. A study of black child care professionals by Elizabeth Herzog and her associates indicated that black social workers were by no means uniformly opposed to transracial adoption (Herzog, Sudia and Harwood, 1971). Herzog found that the attitude of black social workers tended to vary with their contact with the practice. Those workers who had substantial contact with transracial adoption were generally favorable to it, although their support was not unqualified. Those black professionals who had no contact were much more critical.

A more recent piece of research on community rather than professional attitudes towards transracial adoption has been conducted in a Midwestern black community by Alicia Howard and her co-workers. This research found that nearly 57 percent of the sample were generally receptive to the idea of transracial adoption, while only 7 percent of those questioned were unswervingly opposed. Perhaps even more significant was the feeling expressed by 81 percent of the respondents that a black would be better off in a white adoptive home than in foster care or in an institution (Howard, Royse and Skerl, 1977). Both of the studies cited above suggest that there is a measure, perhaps a considerable measure, of support for

transracial placement within the black community.

To conclude, our research supports the position that transracial adoption remains a viable option for the placement of black children. If we fail to consider it as a possibility for homeless nonwhite children then we are likely to condemn those who cannot be placed in black homes to significant and lasting psychological harm.

Table I Race of Adopted Child and Child's Maladjustment Index Score

		Race	
		White (U.S. born)	Black (U.S. born)
Child's Maladjustment Index Score	1 - 2	45%	27%
	3 - 4	32%	42%
	5 - 8	22%	31%
	Total	100%	100%
	N	93	55

$x^2 = 4.687$, 2df, significant at the .05 level

Table II Child's Age At Adoption and Maladjustment Index Score

		Child's Age At Adoption					
		Less than 2 yrs.	2 yrs - 2 yrs 11 mo	3 yrs - 3 yrs 11mo	4 yrs and over	Total	N
Child's	1 - 2	83%	6%	2%	10%	100%	52
Maladjustment	3 - 4	75%	0%	6%	20%	100%	51
Index Score	5 - 8	41%	0%	13%	47%	100%	32

$X^2 = 26.47$, 6 df, significant at the .001 level

Table III Child's Age and Maladjustment Score Index

		Child's Age					
		Less than 2 yrs.	2 yrs - 4 yrs 11mo	5 yrs - 9 yrs 11mo	10 or more	Total	N
Child's Maladjustment Index Score	1 - 2	20%	31%	36%	13%	100%	55
	3 - 4	2%	36%	36%	26%	100%	50
	5 - 8	0%	17%	50%	33%	100%	36

$x^2 = 22.61$, 6 df, significant at the .001 level

Table IV Regression of Child's Maladjustment on Selected Adoptive Characteristics Among Families Adopting a White or Black Child

Independent Variables	Regression Coefficient	Standardized Regression Coefficient
Constant	1.609	
BLACK ADOPTED CHILD (WHITE ADOPTED CHILD - excluded)	.066	.018
AGE	.079	.148
AGE AT ADOPTION	.210*	.233*
FAMILY OPPOSITION	.229*	.211*
R^2	.209	
N	153	

* significant at the .05 level

Definitions of Variables in Table IV

AGE AT ADOPTION	Adopted child's age at time of adoption (0 = 1-11 months; 1 - 12-23 months; 2 = 24- 35 months etc.)
AGE	Adopted child's age at time of study (0 = 1- 11 months; 1 = 12-23 months; 2 = 24-35 months etc.)
FAMILY OPPOSITION	Index of extended family opposition to adoption (3 = least opposition; 12 = most opposition)
BLACK ADOPTED CHILD	U.S. born black child
WHITE ADOPTED CHILD	U.S. born white child

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